

Chapter 4

The Diner

Kevin's dad used to yak about family history a lot, whenever things were going well and the family was on a long drive to a lake or a mountain somewhere. He told the kids about their ancestors and where they were buried. He would stop by cemeteries in New England and point out names and talk a little bit about the people underneath the dirt. Some of the dates were so far back that Kevin couldn't comprehend how many generations must have passed. Others were more recent, though Kevin never met the people buried there.

Dad showed them pictures of immense families, the men bearded and bow-tied and the women all wearing dark dresses. The children in the photos wore knee-length pants with suspenders, or dresses with flowered hats. They were usually posing on the porch of a wide shingled house. It was as if the pictures were not only taken in a different time but in a different universe. A universe where there was no divorce, no violence, no broken families like Kevin's.

If Kevin's family was related to the glorious families in the pictures, then they had done a terrible job of keeping up the tradition. Mom only had one brother and Dad was an only child. Though her parents were alive until Kevin was in junior high, he never knew Dad's parents. Dad hardly ever talked about them. His family was never in the photos. Kevin always figured they were the black sheep.

Holidays were lonely for the family. Usually, Dad was sloshed before 7PM, and argued with everybody. Mom's parents and brother learned to stay in a hotel instead of the house. Eventually, they stopped coming.

When Mom's parents died, Dad didn't even make it to their funerals. By then, Kevin realized they hated him. He knew that he and Kristen would have been closer to them if it wasn't for Dad. Kristen was already a jaded teen. She was listening to hardcore metal and wearing a lot of black. She had a couple of tattoos that Mom never knew about. Mom had no control over her at all, and Kevin himself was already turning into a real prick.

He got back to the hotel, in the middle of the cute little tourist town north of Harbin, and it was already getting dark. There were families everywhere, walking around with children in colorful winter coats, holding on to their moms' leather-gloved hands. They were parking their shiny SUVs and pushing jogging strollers. Everybody looked happy.

Kevin found a burger stand in the middle of town, on a street he missed the day before. He placed his order and stood out front, watching people. He could have taken a photo of any of them, and they would have fit well with the old photos Dad always showed him. These families were nothing like anything Kevin knew.

When the phone rang the next morning, Kevin almost rolled off the bed onto the floor. It was unbelievably loud. The clock read 6:15. "What the hell?" he thought. He picked

it up and the voice said there was a person in the lobby looking for him. She handed the phone over to that person. It was Kristen.

“Kev?” she asked.

Kevin stammered sleepily into the phone, “What the f...? Kris, what are you...? How did you find me?” He had never known Kristen to be very responsible. His head roiled with hateful things to say to her. What to do to her. If Kevin was awake, he would be furious. As it was, he only felt a little pissed.

“Kevin, I’m sorry,” she said into the phone. “I had to come find you. We need to talk.” She sounded like she was sobbing.

“What is going on?” Kevin asked.

“Kevin, please, come down.”

Kevin suddenly realized that whatever she had to say could not be said in front of the hotel desk workers. “Give me a minute,” he said. He had not taken a shower. Hell, he was supposed to be asleep for two more hours. How she found him, and why she thought he might be up and around at 6AM, Kevin had to know. He got ready in a few minutes and headed for the elevator.

The elevator doors opened to the lobby, and Kevin saw Kristen sitting on one of the seats next to a fireplace. He hated to admit it, but she looked good. She was dolled up like one of the tourist moms he had seen visiting the snotty shops in town. She wore a red scarf, a purplish wool hat, and a beige woolen

coat with a furry collar. She was holding red leather gloves that matched the scarf. Beneath the hat, Kevin saw strands of light blonde hair, and he raised an eyebrow. He had never seen her blonde.

What really irritated Kevin was that she looked younger.

“Why are you here?” he demanded.

“That’s a hell of a greeting,” she said in the hectoring voice she used when they were kids.

“Sorry, it’s early.”

“I know. I got here last night, but couldn’t sleep. We need to talk. Can we get breakfast?” She started walking toward the front desk. “Do you know where we can get-“

“Kris!” Kevin said as he grabbed her. “I know a place.”

She turned around and looked at him with surprise. She pulled her arm away angrily. That’s when Kevin noticed her face.

“What did you do to your face?” he asked.

“What? Oh,” she said, touching her lips. “Puffed. That’s all. You know what I do for a living. Looks are everything.”

“You’re always acting like you’re a movie star or something.”

“Hey, my clients have expectations. It’s not like your job. You could look like a zombie and, y’know, like right now-“

“Fuck you.”

“Sorry,” she said, now smiling. “But I’ve always wanted to know about architects, what’s with the bow ties?”

Kevin let that one slip by. He didn’t really know of a diner in this tourist town, but he did remember the place in Harbin. “C’mon,” he said. “Let’s get breakfast. Where’s your car?”

Kristen gestured toward the door and started walking. Kevin caught up to her. “Y’know, it’s April,” he said, looking at her full winter getup. “It’s not like its frigid out.”

“Fuck you it’s not,” she said. They stepped outside, and Kevin realized it was pretty cold. He was wearing a thin sweatshirt and no gloves, and he immediately reached into his coat pockets.

“See?” she said.

Kevin frowned at her. “So how did you find out where I was?” he asked.

“Your work. What’s her name told me exactly how to reach you when I told her about Dad.”

“Dad?” Kevin hollered. He heard his voice echo through the town. “What about Dad? Did you finally talk to him?”

“I did. You were an asshole so I had to call him myself.”

They were halfway down the stairs to her car, a pretty nice BMW sport-ute. It was black, or at least it looked black in the darkness. It was also covered with residue from the wet

roads. This was going to be another cold, misty day, and Kevin was getting really sick of them.

They got into the car, and Kevin asked her, “What is going on with him?”

“Hold on,” she said. “Where are we going?”

Kevin pointed the way, and Kristen started up the car and pulled out of the spot. She turned toward Harbin and drove pretty fast for the conditions.

“Kris, there might be black ice,” Kevin warned.

“Thought you said it wasn’t that cold,” she said.

“Fine, it’s your funeral,” Kevin said as he grabbed the door handle.

Kristen started laughing.

“What?” he asked.

“Funeral. You are such an asshole. I talked to Dad,” she said, getting a grip on her composure.

“You said that. What’s it have to do with a funeral?”

“Kevin, Dad is dying.”

Kevin looked out the window. He kind of wanted to know more, but he did not want to ask her. He also did not want to talk to Dad. “Left up ahead. The fork,” he said.

Kristen steered the car onto the road into Harbin. This road would become its Main Street, where the diner was. He hoped the diner would be open, but most were at this hour.

“Kevin, don’t you care?” she asked.

Kevin waited, realizing after a moment that he did care. “Not really,” he said.

“You don’t understand, because I didn’t tell you the whole story yet,” Kristen said.

Kevin shook his head and yelled, “What could possibly be the story? Is it something contagious and we have it too?”

“Kevin, no! What is your problem?”

“Why did you drive all the way up here?”

“I just got really freaked out when your boss told me where you were.”

They passed a road sign that read “Welcome to Harbin, Pop. 14,000.”

“You mean up here?” Kevin asked.

“Yeah. Here,” she said.

“So what?” Kevin yelled. He was furious. “They said I was in Harbin, way up in east mooseknuckle, and you had to drive all the friggin’ way here to tell me Dad is kicking it?”

“No, when I talked to him, he said he wanted to meet. With both of us.”

“Let’s review. Dad abandons us, abandons Mom, and now, years later, he wants to beg our forgiveness? Fuck him!”

“Kevin!”

Kevin was really pissed. Dad wanted some kind of pity party before he died, and he knew it. Pity, Kevin could give him. Forgiveness was another matter.

He just didn’t think this would come so soon, that was all. It caught him by surprise.

Kristen calmed down and continued, “Kevin, when I talked to Dad, he told me he wanted to meet us here. In Harbin.”

Kevin’s brain started flipping over in his head. “What? When?” he demanded.

“I don’t know, soon, maybe next weekend. I tried to call you about it and they said you were already here. That’s why I freaked. Something’s really weird.”

“Kris, Dad must have known I was here, that’s all.”

“No, he didn’t. He wanted me to come pick you up in Long Island. He wanted me to lie. He knew you would never call him.”

Kevin was confused. “So out of the blue, he asks you to come see him in Harbin?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I was hoping you would know,” Kristen said.

“Sorry,” Kevin told her. He had no idea why Dad wanted to meet the two of them in Harbin. It could have been the weirdest coincidence he had ever been a part of.

Kevin felt the car speeding up. “Slow down!” he yelled.

“What? What?” Kristen yelled in a panic.

“The diner’s coming up,” Kevin said.

They pulled into the parking lot of the little diner that used to be a chain donut shop. It was very close to the center of the town, and it was open. A couple of small cars and a

beat-up pickup truck were in the parking lot. The sun had not yet risen above the horizon, and the light from the windows threw squares of yellow light on the lot.

They walked into the diner. Kevin looked like a ragged flood victim, unshaven, unshowered, and in sweats. Kristen looked like a model from a Christmas catalog, buttoned up with her hat and scarf. A waitress, looking almost elderly but exuding a youthful and gracious smile, came by and laughed.

“Sit anywhere, honey,” she said.

Two gruff-looking men were sitting at the bar, clad in thick flannel jackets. A cook was working the grill under a stainless steel hood, and otherwise the place was empty. Kevin and Kristen picked a booth near a heating vent and sat down.

The walls were covered with 1950s kitsch. Hubcaps, license plates, and old soda and cigarette labels were tacked to the yellow walls. The tables were lined with chrome and worn green laminate. Kevin had seen places like this that were designed to look antique. But this was the real thing. As an architect, he found himself taking mental notes.

“Jeez, I hope they have a fruit cup,” Kristen said as she pulled off her hat and gloves.

Kevin laughed aloud. The waitress walked over to them, this time with a full pot of hot coffee and some menus. “Now, how ‘bout some joe to warm you up?” she asked as she began to pour Kevin’s cup. Then she looked up at Kristen and screamed loudly.

The coffee pot fell to the floor and shattered, spreading glass and hot coffee everywhere. The waitress clutched her apron and walked back into the counter. She never took her eyes off of Kristen, who sat there looking frozen. Kevin stood up and looked at the floor. The two gruff guys were standing now, watching the scene.

“What’s wrong?” Kevin asked frantically.

The woman put her hand over her mouth and then pointed at Kristen. “It’s her!” she shrieked. She sat down on one of the stools.

“What’s happening, Annie?” hollered the cook, without turning from the grill.

Kristen began to look really scared, and the waitress saw it. Tears started streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry, honey!” the waitress said. She stood up and walked toward Kristen. “It’s just, I’ve been seeing your face for two weeks already.”

The two men standing by the counter took a step forward. The waitress sobbed for another minute, and backed away from the table again. The men helped her sit on one of the stools. She took a napkin from the dispenser on the counter and rubbed her eyes.

Kristen looked stunned. Her knuckles turned white as she held the table. She stared at the table, trying not to look up at the waitress. Kevin was staring at the coffee and glass all over the floor, and he heard one of the men say something.

“How ‘bout it, huh?” said one of the guys, nodding to Kevin, and then nodding toward a mop leaning against the wall behind the counter. Kevin was about to shoot him a defiant look, but realized the guy was probably right. He was the best person for the job at the moment. He went to get the mop.

“Thanks, hon,” Kevin heard the waitress say.

The cook handed over the mop, and Kevin started mopping the coffee and glass into a pile. The mop was completely sogged within a few seconds and he saw the cook pushing the bucket around the counter toward him.

“You’re a dear,” said the waitress. “I didn’t mean to scare you.” She looked at Kristen, who finally looked up again. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

Kristen spoke tenuously. “It’s okay,” she said.

Kevin was curious. “What did you mean you’ve been seeing her face?” he asked.

Annie never took her eyes off of Kristen. “For two weeks, I’ve been seeing her face at my house,” she said.

“At your house? How?”

“Well, in the wall by the stairs,” Annie said. “It first appeared, and I thought it was some weird feature in the wallpaper. But my husband never saw it, and he stared and stared.”

Kristen spoke up, “So it appeared only to you?”

“No, no, when he can’t see it, I can’t see it. I tried.”

“It’s the lights, Annie,” said one of the men standing by.

“No! It’s there whenever I ain’t ready. When I look, I can’t see it, but when I’m doing something else, there it is,” she sobbed.

Kristen looked at her arm. She was getting goosebumps. So was Kevin.

“And it looks like me,” said Kristen.

Annie nodded, “Spitting image, dear,” she said.

“I don’t understand,” Kristen said.

“I sure as hell don’t either. Guys, thanks, your breakfast’s gonna get cold,” she said to the two men.

“S’alright. It’s how I like it,” said one of them, and they lumbered back to their stools.

Annie looked at Kevin. The floor was pretty clean now, and he was pushing the glass into a pile. “Don’t worry about the glass,” she said. “We’ll get it.” Then she walked around behind the counter. “Sam! Two of the works on me. Quick it up!”

Kevin sat down across the table from Kristen. “You okay?” he asked.

She nodded slowly. “I told you something’s weird.”

“I guess I understand.”

“Yeah,” Kristen said.

Annie appeared with a brand new pot of coffee. “Okay, let’s try this again,” she said. She began to pour Kevin a new cup, and then filled Kristen’s. “Now we’ve got a big plate of bacon & hash browns coming up. On the house. How do you

like your eggs?” She took a pile of creams out of her apron and threw them on the table.

Kevin looked up. He could tell Kristen thought about asking for a fruit cup, but after a minute she said, “Scrambled.” Kevin agreed.

Annie walked away, and Kevin started making his coffee. He never liked coffee, even though he had been drinking it for years. He still used about four creams and sugars. Kristen drank hers black, and she looked at Kevin with a smirk.

“You should just get a hot chocolate,” she chided.

“Shush. This is how I like it,” he said.

“Ooh, a little belligerent, huh?”

Kevin looked at her and groaned.

“So you kids not from around here?” said a voice. It was one of the gruff men. He apparently had finished his breakfast and turned around.

“No, just here for work,” Kevin said.

“Mighty strange, missie, that you looked like someone in a wall, ain’t it?”

Kevin could see Kristen getting uneasy.

“Now leave them alone, won’t you?” said Annie. She came back around with a plate of wheat toast and jelly.

“Just askin!” said the man.

The man next to him piped up, “Annie, don’t you live in that place up on East Maple?”

“No, Jimmy, that was awhile back. We moved to Acre. You know that.”

“Acre, oh, yes,” the man, apparently Jimmy, said.

“Wait a minute,” said the first man again. “You mean 14?”

Annie was getting impatient with them. “Yes. 14 Acre Drive,” she said.

The first man got up from his seat and walked toward the booth where Kevin and Kristen were sitting. “If you look like someone at 14 Acre, you better just be here for work,” he said, sounding angry.

“Steven!” Annie hollered at him. “You sit down!”

“Sorry, Annie, we just don’t want any trouble here,”

“No, I don’t want any trouble here,” said Annie with a stare. “Am I lookin’ at it?”

Steven went back to his chair, silently.

Annie put the toast down in front of Kevin and Kristen. “I don’t know what they’re all spooked about. I think it’s ghosts in the house, and there’s always ghosts somewhere. Y’know? People die in a house and everyone sees ghosts. Who knows what it is?”

“Do those ghosts walk into your diner, Annie,” hollered one of the men.

“Jimmy, don’t you start, too. I’ll boot your asses into the road,” Annie warned them.

Jimmy, who was the taller and older of the two men, stood up and walked toward the booth. He did not appear as threatening as the other guy.

“Annie,” he said quietly. “Do you know what 14 Acre is?”

“Honey, I moved here in ’76, you know that,” she answered.

“That’s the Claremont place.”

Annie stood up and looked at him. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” said Jimmy. Then he looked at Kristen and squinted through his narrow glasses. “You do look like her,” he said.

“Look like who?” Kristen asked.

“There’s a girl. Died there. I thought she might haunt the place, but this is the first time it’s been talked about.”

“You knew this girl?” Kevin asked.

“Everyone did,” said Jimmy.

“Jimmy, you’re in dangerous waters,” said the other guy without looking up from the counter. “I wouldn’t say no more.”

“You never knew her,” said Jimmy curtly. He looked at us and then at Annie. “None of you folks knew her. And that’s as it should be.” He walked back to his seat.

Annie went to get the breakfast plates. Kevin could see through the windows that it was now light out. The sky was reddish-yellow, and from where he was sitting, he could see

the dark silhouette of the hospital ruin standing above the trees a half mile away.

Steve and Jimmy paid their tab and left. Nobody else came in while he and Kristen ate their breakfast. When they were done, Annie came over.

“Now don’t let those fellas bother you,” she said. If you’re here on work, then do good work. If you’re not, I want to see if you can see this girl. This face in my wall.”

Kristen and Kevin were dumbstruck. This woman must have been freaked out more than they were, but she was brave. Kevin had to hand her that.

“Thanks, Annie,” he said. “How much for breakfast?”

“Not a dime!” she said.

“But that’s-“

“Absolutely not. Now you go and have a good day.”

Kevin reached into the pocket of his sweatpants to discover that he had not brought his wallet. Kristen frowned at him and pulled out her pocketbook. She left a hefty tip. They walked back out to the car, and the chill hit Kevin pretty hard. They had been sitting by the heater.

“Well, now what?” Kristen asked.

“I have to go get cleaned up. I was going to leave today,” Kevin said, shivering.

“Okay-“

“Hey! You kids! Thank you!” hollered Annie, standing in the doorway of the diner. They waved at her.

“Don’t forget, 14 Acre Drive!” she yelled.

“Thanks!” Kevin yelled back. He could not believe this woman was going to allow them into her house. He was never going to take her up on it anyway. He suddenly realized what he wanted to do next.

“Kris, let’s go call Dad,” he said.